

Prague

By Peter David Smith

In the early 2000s, or “The Naughties” as some people liked to call them, I was able to get away for a brief holiday. It was around about 2005 or so.

I was working in an Exeter branch of Sainsburys supermarket as a nightshift cleaner.

On sale in the drinks area of the shop there was a cheap brand of wine which was packaged as a box of four bottles and had a voucher on the side for a free holiday abroad.

The deal was: buy the wine, cut-out the voucher, choose three holiday locations from a list of available ones, send it in and get a free aeroplane ticket to one of the three destinations. I’m not a wine drinker and, in fact, I don’t even like alcohol but I figured I could either give the wine to people at Christmas or use it in cookery or something.

The three destinations I chose were New York, Nice or Prague. And that is how I came to be flying by EasyJet to Prague in the middle of February.

It was a very cold February. Temperatures in England were below zero and Prague temperatures were actually slightly lower.

I couldn’t afford a hotel but I had YHA membership and so was able to book a place in a travellers’ hostel in central Prague. I knew hardly any words in the Czech language.

It was the first time I had travelled in a commercial passenger jet plane. My previous experience of flying had only been in a propeller aircraft and also in a glider. Travelling in jet was very different. This was also my first experience of the unpleasant ear-popping sensation which was caused by the change in air pressure.

When we arrived in Prague I had my first experience of the “baggage carousel”, one of the most stupid systems I have ever seen. It baffles me how anyone in their right mind could ever have thought that a “baggage carousel” was a good way of handling people’s luggage.

Nevertheless, eventually I had my luggage back again and I ventured out to the streets. Happy to be travelling again, happy to be in the land of Franz Kafka, even though I only had three days away from work, I danced about on the ice and snow which had been shovelled up into piles outside the airport.

Then I got a tram into the city centre and found the hostel. A nice, friendly place on Národní *“an 11-minute stroll from the landmark Charles Bridge and 2 km from the 9th-century Prague Castle”*.

I was wearing blue and yellow pastel shade plimsols and blue jeans with a jumper and a West German obsolete army surplus jacket.

I signed in at the front desk and was allocated a bed in a shared room. There was only one other guest in the same room although there were lots of vacant beds. A slow season, freezing February. The other person was a Japanese chap and when I asked him where he was from he replied “From Japan!!!!” in an astonished voice, as if someone of Japanese appearance couldn’t be from anywhere except Japan.

I went out for a walk around Prague.

I loved the “old town” part of the city, especially. And the bridge, and the castle, and the shops, and the little passageways with beautiful little art galleries.

There was a Hare Krishna restaurant which made really amazing rainbow pakoras. I looked in a lot of bookshops, record shops, food shops. I didn’t know very much of the language but I could manage simple things like “Ano, Ne, dobra, dobre vecher and ano, ale jak?” I also knew “Prosím” but had to stupidly look up “Děkuju” each time because I forgot it. I also (annoyingly, I imagine) kept saying “dobre vecher” (which means “good evening”) at all times of the day, morning, noon and night. I’m so stupid.

There was a branch of a British supermarket “Tesco” but it looked very different from the ones at home. In Britain Tesco is mainly food orientated but also sells clothing and other types of thing. In Prague Tesco looked like a smart clothes shop which also had a food hall, after the style of M&S.

People kept making eye contact with me and smiling. I wasn’t used to that, coming from grumpy old England.

I went to a record shop and bought some music by Czech bands I’d never heard or heard of. Taking pot luck that maybe the music would be good.

My rucksack fell to pieces mysteriously under the strain of overpacking. So I went to a Czech equivalent of Millets and bought a new one with “Option Snowboards” written on it and a special sort of flap for holding the snowboard in place. I don’t own a snowboard but it was a rucksack at a bargain price made by a Canadian snowboard company.

I went to the museum.

I was surprised at the uniform the museum staff were wearing. There was a woman handing out brightly coloured booklets but she was dressed like a Russian soldier of the Soviet era. I wasn’t sure if it was meant to be a historical costume or if that’s simply the museum staff uniform.

Every time she handed someone a booklet she licked her finger and put some of her saliva onto the booklet. I refused to take a booklet because of the unhygienic spittle. We had a brief argument in two mutually misunderstood languages but I walked quickly away and up the stairs. I’ve often had similar arguments with equally unhygienic people in England. There were a lot of people before the Covid-19

pandemic who thought it was somehow clever to put their spit on things and spread germs to everybody. Since the pandemic a lot of those stupid people are not around anymore.

Everywhere was ice and snow. My heart was full of wonderment to see old churches and synagogues in the icy cobblestone streets of the old part of Prague and the timewarped architectures of the Soviet style next to the newer and older parts of the city. It felt like a dream to be in the heart of Bohemia.

I was glad I had come to Prague in the winter. The winter made everything special.

I went walking in Hostivar Forest Park and it was like Narnia! I walked through that snowy forest and emerged to an area where kids and families were sliding down the snowy hill slopes on snowboards and also on what appeared to be homemade toboggans.

The money was in “koruna česká”, known as “Crowns”.

I bought some tea bags labelled “Caj”, the Czech word for tea, but when I got back to England my nosey, snoopy landlord, Derek, kept making odd remarks about the “Caj”, which he assumed must be some kind of weird drug. He made similar comments about the box that my Wacom Graphics tablet came in because it was a cardboard box displaying the word “tablet” in big letters. He was always snooping in the hope of finding evidence of criminal activity.

In Prague I saw a shop window displaying a bottle of some kind of, presumably alcohol based, drink which had a distinctive five-fold cannabis leaf submerged in it. It made me think that cannabis might be legal in the Czech Republic. Upon checking I found out that cannabis wasn't legal except in some instances or when there is only a very tiny amount of the active chemical.

I didn't want any. I don't even drink alcohol or smoke tobacco. However I wanted to know, out of curiosity, what the law was.

That was then and this is now. Apparently the Czech Republic is now moving toward legalisation. So that'll be good news for people who like that sort of thing. I prefer sobriety.

Flying back to England was uneventful until I arrived back in Gatwick Airport (because the free aeroplane ticket to Prague had specified that I had to go through Gatwick) where I encountered the bloody stupid baggage carousel system again.

I waited a long time but my new “Option Snowboards” rucksack wasn't anywhere on the carousel. Eventually I started searching all around the airport building until I found my new rucksack abandoned, leaning against the outside of some offices.

I sat down and unpacked the rucksack on a bench.

I carefully checked every single item in the bag to make sure nothing had been stolen and nothing had been planted.

When I was 100% sure that nothing bad or illegal had been planted, I went through customs. The customs officer asked me A LOT of questions. I had the feeling that she was making sure I was really British returning home and not an illegal immigrant.

Eventually she waved me through.

I got a coach back to the Victoria Coach Station in London. In the three days I had been in Prague I had gotten used to the way people there made eye contact and smiled. In Victoria Coach Station there were some black youths sitting together in a group with skateboards. Absent mindedly I made eye contact and smiled. One of the boys reacted to that by saying “Yeah? Nice trainers mate, dy’wanna lose them?” and his mates nudged him to shut up and stop embarrassing them all.

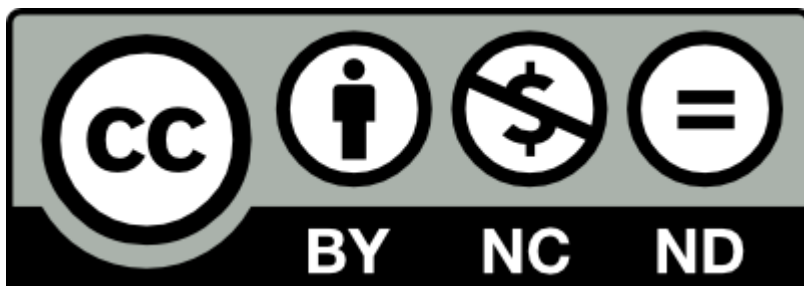
Obviously I was back in dear old Blighty.

On the coach back to Exeter I was putting on headphones to listen to an audiobook. The old German woman in the seat in front of me complained that she was being bothered by “the music”. I explained that (A) it wasn’t “music”, it was a talking book and (B) I hadn’t even switched it on yet.

I disembarked from the coach at Exeter and trudged home through the snow to the Polsloe Road slum. I was reflecting that the spirit of Franz Kafka was in everything throughout European civilisation.

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